Disgusting Ugly Violence in the Medieval Adventure Romance *Jaufre*[*]

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A word or two first about the title for my talk. There seems to be no single word, no stable term in the language of traditional literary criticism for the phenomenon I wish to discuss. The absence of a word does not mean that there is no such thing; rather, the critics' language is like the anecdotal "Eskimo" language which has hundreds of words for different types of snow and the Brazilian language that names every species and sub-species of parrot but have no single term for "snow" or "parrot." Disgusting ugly violence permeates the texts used to introduce students to the glory of Greece, the grandeur of Rome, the grace of the Middle Ages, but it is named, discussed, and explained or explained away in terms particular and unique to each separate work. In a way, I am pleased that there is no such stable term, for the traditional language of literary criticism would probably have given us a phrase like "tragic flaw," "dramatic irony," or "comic relief" which clarify poems like butter and dissolve textual problems without even confronting them. If such a term existed, it would have to be dismantled before we could proceed with the task of discovering the meaning-in-context of particular examples of repulsive, brutal slaughter.

Jaufre[1] was written in Provençal for the Catalan-speaking court of King James I, King of Aragon and Count of Barcelona, in the late 1220s or early 1230s, when James was in his late teens or early twenties. That is, it was written in the language spoken by the people living in the south of France just after their lands had been ravaged by an invading army, composed largely of landless knights and mercenaries from the north. This expedition, curiously known as the Albigensian Crusade, led by an Abbot of Cîteaux, encouraged by the beliefs of a Bishop of Toulouse. and of Saint Dominic and initiated by the curiously named Innocent III, had destroyed the power structure of the semi-independent counties of the land, had massacred thousands of its people, both

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[1] Jaufre: An Occitan Arthurian Romance, tr. Ross G. Arthur, (New York: Garland, 1992; Abingdon: Routledge, 2014)

the heretics who were burned and the Catholics who died in battle because they rejected foreign domination, and had placed the region under the control of a petty Norman noble named Simon de Montfort. The audience for the poem is a court led by nobles of Catalonia who had resisted the crusaders as much as was in their power and who had provided a safe haven for the dispossessed victims of the crusade. Its king had been a hostage of Simon de Montfort in his youth, and his father had been killed in a battle against Simon and his army; he would go on to reconquer Mallorca and Valencia from the Moors and to become the focus for Catalan nationalism and expansion, expansion which would lead in due course to the establishment of Catalan power as far away as Athens. When the poem was composed, however, he was still in the process of trying to reimpose royal control over a kingdom divided by internal strife and impoverished by debts incurred to resist the crusaders.

A simple summary of the poem's events, however, shows little sign of such large-scale political concerns, and indeed makes it quite easy to understand how traditional literary criticism has been able to see it as an idealizing fantasy, differing little from the adventure-romances produced in the quite different social environments of France, Germany, and England. After a short introductory episode, in which the poet praises King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table quite lavishly but then demonstrates that they do not live up to their reputation, a young man named Jaufre arrives at the court asking to be knighted. Immediately afterward, a villain named Taulat de Rogimon comes in, kills an unarmed knight, and departs. Jaufre is dubbed a knight, receives his armor from the king, and sets out in pursuit. Before he finds him, however, he becomes involved in a number of subsidiary adventures, fighting against four other villains who break the rules of proper chivalric conduct and meeting the beautiful lady Brunissen, who will eventually become his wife. Even after he has defeated Taulat and is preparing to marry Brunissen, he is required, even forced, to rescue a maiden named Fada de Gibel from another villain, appropriately named Fellon d'Albarua, in a magical realm which can be entered only by diving down through a miraculous fountain. After an elaborate wedding feast, at which the deficiencies of Arthur and the established court are again revealed, Jaufre returns to Brunissen's castle and gives every indication that he will be a generous seigneur and a loyal, loving husband.

Because the poem has a basic structure so similar to the hundreds of romances produced for the Angevin and Capetian courts of the north, and because it is marginal to several scholarly disciplines – students of romances concentrate on the larger body of material in French, students of Provençal concentrate on troubadour lyric, Catalan scholars concentrate on works written in Catalan – *Jaufre* has not received a great deal of critical attention. This means that the paths of analysis have not been fixed by the scholarly establishment, and just about any idea a reader has can become a fruitful line of inquiry. The sort of things I want to say about the poem could be reached through

an examination of individualism and collectivity, confidence and despair, clothing and nakedness, feasting and fasting, lust and power – or shocking vicious brutality.

Jaufre is filled with ugly people who do wicked things. Critics tend to paraphrase the portions of their texts which present such matters, in order to comfort their readers, just as silent readers tend to skim them to shield themselves, but since the effect of these orally presented words on an audience is an important part of my analysis, with your permission, I will quote:

> This leper got up at once and grabbed an enormous club; Jaufre was seized by dread when he saw how disfigured he was. He was almost as tall as a lance, with shoulders two yards wide. He had gnarled arms and puffy hands, crooked teeth and shrinking gums, a face covered with monstrous swellings, hard puffy eyelids with no lashes, dark menacing pupils, staring bloodshot eyes surrounded by red. His gums were receding, thick, blue and swollen, and his huge red teeth stank like venom. All his face was enflamed and crimson like a burning coal, with a flattened nose with distended nostrils in the middle. His breathing was labored and his voice so hoarse that he could scarcely speak. (ll. 2310–2334)

> "[Fellon d'Albarua] has a head bigger than a bull's, eyes bigger than eggs, a monstrous forehead, a flattened twisted nose, thick puffy lips, huge dangling teeth, and a mouth larger than a leopard's, stretching from ear to ear. He has a horse's neck, huge hips, a fat puffy belly, fat long thighs and thin twisted legs. No one ever saw such an ugly thing! I tell you this for your own good, my lord, so he won't frighten you. That's what happens to other people, that when they see him coming they can't keep from fleeing . . . I would rather be hanged than fall into his clutches." (ll. 8769–8799)

In order for such ugliness to be called "repulsive" or "disgusting" there must be an audience to react to it. In these passages, the responses of the poem's characters are a key to the expected reactions of the reader. Jaufre is shocked and temporarily paralysed by the sight of the giant leper, and the damsel in distress would prefer death to suffering an assault by Fellon d'Albarua. Elsewhere, however, the poet draws his audience into a more complex and twisted relationship with these characters, through direct address in order to incite violent impulses and through a detached display of the predicament of their victims:

> But then an ugly little dwarf leapt out from a thicket where he had been hiding. He was short, swollen and dumpy, with a huge head and stringy hair spread over his shoulders, and eyelashes so long they seemed to be stretching his eyes. His twisted nose was so enormous that you could have put both your thumbs right up his nostrils without even hurting him. He had thick, blubbery lips, monstrously large teeth, a moustache dangling over his mouth, and a beard so long it went past his waist. He was tiny, less than a span from his heel to his crotch, and his neck was fat and thick and so short that he hardly seemed to have one. As for his arms, they were so short that it looked as if you wouldn't be able to bind them behind his back, and his hands were the hands of a toad. (ll. 1382–1405)

More disturbing still is the description of an attempted rape, for the poet's words create an audience which is simultaneously to be identified with both the rapist and the heroic rescuer:

> The house was spacious and beautiful. The leper was there, lying in a bed with a maiden – I don't think there was a more beautiful one in all the world. Her coloring was fair and fresh as a new-born rose, and her dress was ripped to below her breasts, which were whiter than flour. She was wailing and lamenting in great despair, and her eyes were much larger than usual, from crying. (ll. 2297–2309)

The actions of these misshapen creatures are all evil. The giant leper, in addition to assaulting the innocent maiden, has picked up a noble knight and bashed his brains out on a rock as if he were a baby; his henchman, a smaller leper, is in the other room killing babies in the belief that a bath in their blood will cure his master and himself. Fellon d'Albarua has seized all the lands of the damsel Fée de Gibel, and when Jaufre comes to her aid the villain calls out, "Send out that whore who refused me her body! I'm going to give her to the meanest servants in my household, for I no longer want her for myself." (ll. 8931–8935). The poem's various dwarves are incapable of such actions, but they serve masters who capture, imprison and murder passing knights.

These hateful masters are proof that we are not dealing here with a simple-minded equation of ugliness and evil, or even of low social status and evil. Jaufre encounters a castellan named Estout de Vertfueil, presumably a man of normal size, shape, and appearance, who goes around provoking fights with other knights and forcing his defeated captives to follow him around, cooking his meals under the direction of his ugly little dwarf. The dwarf with the big nose and short arms serves the Knight of the White Lance. If anyone touches his lance, which he leaves temptingly hanging from a beautiful tree on the top of a hill, he gives them two choices. They must renounce chivalry, wine, and wheat bread and must wear only clothes they have made themselves, or they must fight with him, and if they are defeated they will receive no mercy, but be hanged on a nearby tree. Further down the social scale, although not quite so low as the giant leper, there is a foot-soldier who tries to steal knights' horses and armor, and attacks Jaufre with darts, rocks, and knives rather than following proper chivalric procedure; he too has a dungeon full of tortured victims. The brutal action for which the poet reserves his greatest disapproval is performed by the chief villain, Taulat de Rogimon. He has wounded and defeated a knight named Melian, who is Lady Brunissen's overlord. He has kept Melian prisoner for seven years, and every month Taulat's henchmen whip Melian and force him to climb a hill. Melian's old wounds re-open, and by the time they are healed again, a month later, he is tortured once more.

Who will cleanse this world, that hath such creatures in it? If we go by their reputation, it ought to be the established knights of Arthur's court, for we are told that they are the protectors of the oppressed and disinherited. But when circumstances require action instead of words, when Fada de Gibel asks for aid against Fellon

d'Albarua, they ignore her and turn their attention to a *story* of someone else's adventure. Melian should be rescued by his own vassals, but their response to his captivity is to inaugurate a program of ritual lamentation, four times each day and three times each night, wailing and tearing their hair and beating their breasts. They love their imprisoned lord so much that when Jaufre asks the reason for this strange behavior, they beat him senseless.

Just as the route to an overview of evil in the poem proceeded through an examination of extreme ugliness, so we come to understand the rectification of evil by a slightly more circuitous path through descriptions of extreme beauty. The portraits of Jaufre and Brunissen use the same structures and the same rhetorical devices as the portraits of the dwarves and monsters. Jaufre enters Arthur's hill:

> At that moment they saw a tall, handsome young lord enter the room, proceeding with a great deal of assurance. I think that no one ever saw man born of woman better fashioned than he. He had shoulders a yard wide, handsome and well-chiselled features, tender laughing eyes, shining golden hair, powerful muscular arms, and beautiful hands with finely moulded fingers. He was lean and lanky, with long straight legs and well-arched feet. He wore a tailored tunic of peacock silk, and hose to match, and on his head an elegant garland of fresh flowers of various hues. His face was bronzed by the sun. (ll. 523–546).

The audience response to this portrait is directed by the reaction of Arthur and his knights, which is very positive indeed, but in the portrait of Brunissen the poet is more direct, making our admiration for the woman an integral part of her description:

> Five hundred damsels served Brunissen at her pleasure, night and day, but she surpassed them all in her great beauty. One could search all this world and list all the beautiful women in it, and there would be none so beautiful or so well-formed. If anyone gazed at her eyes and her beautiful face, they'd make him forget all the others he'd seen, so that he wouldn't even be able to recall them. She was fresher and whiter and more beautiful than snow frozen on a branch, than a rose with a fleur de lis. There was not the slightest fault in her, not a spot that was ugly or displeasing: she was made so perfectly that there was no need of more here or less there. Her mouth was so pleasing that, when it was well observed, it seemed to say that one was going to kiss it. (ll. 3127–3150).

Did I mention that the audience for this poem contained a large number of underemployed upper-class adolescent males?

The traditional aristocratic link between beauty and virtue, however, is broken fairly quickly. Shortly after Brunissen is described, she learns that someone has entered her private garden and disturbed the birds. Because they are not singing, she cannot sleep. She orders her seneschal to go to the garden, find the intruder, and kill him. Jaufre's descent from the ideal takes a bit longer, but is no less complete. When he defeats the Knight of the White Lance, whose major crime is that he hangs his defeated opponents rather than granting them mercy, Jaufre refuses to grant *him* mercy, and hangs him on the same tree. When he has defeated the foot soldier, he deliberates and decides that a

thief deserves no mercy. He has already ripped off the man's arms in the course of the fight; now he cuts off his feet and taunts him, saying, "I beg you now, don't go running and jumping around and fighting with knights. It's time for you to get another job, for you've been at this one too long." (ll. 1880ff). In these and all similar encounters, Jaufre is very careful to find out, before he begins to fight, whether he is fighting for the Right or for the Wrong, and once he knows he is fighting for the Right he sees all his actions as divinely justified. It would seem that, in this poem, the nomenclature problem I mentioned at the beginning can be solved quite easily. When it comes from misshapen monsters and wilderness renegades, brutal violence is called "villainy"; when it comes from a handsome knight in the service of the best king in all the world, it is called "justice."

Critical conclusions such as this last sentence usually come at the end of analyses by critics who call themselves deconstructionists and claim to have discovered in the text a contradiction which the society in question was unwilling to confront. I have heard this done brilliantly for *Beowulf* and not so brilliantly for the *Odyssey*, but I am sure Homer's time will come. Much as I might like to be a part of this critical avant garde, however, I do not think they will have me. I am not reading against the grain of the text of *Jaufre*, although I am reading against a great deal of romance criticism inspired by late nineteenth-century attitudes, just as I believe that the *Jaufre*-poet was one of a number of people in his society who were reading against a living tradition which legitimated brutality under the name of justice.

The contradictions and hypocrisy of texts in that tradition are easy to find. When Simon de Montfort had wasted the land and destroyed the towns and castles of the territory he conquered, he wrote a letter to the Pope asking for financial aid to continue his campaign. He justifies his request by saying, "The land is poor, and everything that is good in it has been destroyed." Pierre de Vaux-Cernay, a chronicler of the crusade, describes how a protector of the heretics had desecrated a monastery by destroying its furniture and sacred vessels. "O strange abomination!" he says, "What a man, this Count of Foix, O beast more ferocious than all other beasts!" (130). Elsewhere, he recounts how the people of Béziers refused to hand over two hundred and twenty-two heretics to the crusaders. When the crusaders entered the town, they killed seven thousand people, Catholic and heretic alike, many of whom had taken refuge in the church of Saint Mary Magdalene. Sacrilege? No. "O supremely just measure of the Divine Will," says Pierre de Vaux-Cernay.

My argument that acts of brutality and acts of justice are fundamentally equated in the text of *Jaufre* is not of the same order as assertions about texts like those of Simon and Pierre. The *Jaufre*-poet uses a whole set of literary techniques to direct his audience toward precisely this conclusion. In the early episodes of the poem, he does this by repeatedly assimilating his hero to his villains. In his first battle, the armor Jaufre received from King Arthur, a source of great pride to him, is systematically pierced,

shredded, and destroyed. To make good his loss, he takes his opponent's armor, and throughout the rest of the poem he is shielded by and fights with the armaments of a villain: their color, in the manuscript illustrations, is Moslem green. He defeats the foot soldier only by using the same unchivalric and grossly physical techniques that the foot soldier used against him. The Knight of the White Lance, who hangs his opponents, says, "If I was mad and hard-hearted and passed wicked judgments, you wouldn't want to be like me" (1500), but Jaufre does: he cuts a long piece of rope and strings him up. After he has defeated the giant leper, he finds himself imprisoned in the house by a magic spell. To escape, he must destroy a statue of the head of a young boy, symbolically re-enacting the infanticide committed by his villainous enemy.

If the poet had been writing a treatise on justice rather than a narrative, his major arguments would have been that the exercise of justice is wasteful, in that it destroys when mercy could rehabilitate, and that the obsessive practitioner of justice is blind to the true purpose of resistance to evil, which is to rescue the victim, not to punish the aggressor. As a poet, he uses his narrative, with its equations of justice and brutality and its examples of disregard for the victim, to direct his audience toward such conclusions.

Jaufre certainly fails, in the early part of the poem, to show proper concern for victims. He finds a wounded knight, in the middle of the night, bleeding to death in the wilderness. He is careful to find out whether the man was in the Right or in the Wrong, and he sets out to find the aggressor, but he needs to be called back to be asked to summon help for the wounded man. As an afterthought, he says to the foot soldier "But there's one little thing that bothers me: I cut off your feet without asking first if you have any knights imprisoned" (1888). The foot soldier surprisingly tells him that he does, and how to find them, but still he is left to bleed to death. He strings up the Knight of the White Lance without bothering to learn whether *he* has any prisoners. When he meets a mother whose baby has been kidnapped by the lepers, he cross-examines her carefully to find out whether the leper had any right to do what he did, and then says ,"I'll get him back for you at once, dead or alive!" (2270).

In time, Jaufre begins to act in a way which shows the positive side of the poet's analysis of the problem. By the time he has tracked down Taulat de Rogimon, he has seen and felt pity for his tortured captive Melian, and he has become more concerned with rescuing Melian than with punishing Taulat. He has become more ready to spare the lives of those he conquers when they ask for mercy. Although modern readers tend to find it surprising and unbelievable, these villains, both the ugly monstrous ones and the renegade knights, turn out to be rather decent chaps after all. In a transformation which we now see as a violation of all we believe that we know about human nature, they confess and repent their past evil actions and become quite fit to re-enter normal human society. Fellon d'Albarua gives up his evil ways, for all his disgusting ugly appearance, and becomes a loyal vassal of Fada de Gibel. The mother of the giant leper, who has gone so far as to summon a devil from Hell to guard her neighborhood and

waste the land for miles around, is transformed into a helpless old widow woman who only tried to protect her sons after their father was killed. She promises to remove the enchantment from the land and to allow all the disinherited people to return, and Jaufre promises to see to it that everyone treats her as a lady for as long as she lives (10767). In this text, mercy transforms sinners who request it every bit as thoroughly as in the dozens of contemporary texts describing the Miracles of the Virgin.

The poem, however, is not simply a description of how one young man proceeded along a path which took him from an incorrect notion of justice to a proper notion of justice: that would allow us to quibble over terms like "vengeance" and "justice" as if they were something other than different names for the same thing, as if "vengeance" were personal, individual, and misguided and "justice" were social and divinely authorized. When Melian brings Taulat de Rogimon to Arthur's court, everyone else forgives the villain for his crimes against them, and he is presented as a man every bit as ready to be assimilated into polite society as all the other villains who have learned their lesson. Melian, however, insists on his legal rights and submits his case to the judgment of Arthur's court. They decide that since Taulat has whipped Melian once a month for seven years until his wounds bleed, Melian may whip Taulat once a month for seven years until his wounds bleed. Jaufre uses all his resources to induce Melian to relent, but all he can obtain for Taulat is a one-month reprieve. The actions of the sinner in his mad pride are precisely and mathematically equivalent to the actions of the just man pursuing ostensibly legitimate vengeance, and the audience is left to ponder the similarity between their own society's rules of law and order and the injunction of the Old Law to take an eye for an eye.

There had been people involved in the debate surrounding the Albigensian Crusade who "read against" their tradition in ways similar to this. There were those who declared that the God of the Old Testament was a murderer, a mass murderer, for what he did to the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, to the Egyptians, to the Moabites. If caught, such proto-deconstructionists were burned, stoned and drowned. If not, many of them became involved in acts against captured crusaders every bit as barbarous as those performed by the crusaders against their victims. On the orthodox side, there were some critics of the crusaders, even of the papal legates and the Pope himself, who reminded their very small audiences that God desires the conversion of the sinner, not his destruction, and that Christ ordered us to forgive our neighbors for seventy times seven trespasses. The *Jaufre* poet does not go quite to this idealistic extreme: he suggests that we confront wrongdoers, slap them silly, but then allow them the chance to repent and reform and then welcome them back into the fold.

It would be interesting to know the exact date of this poem, to know whether it came before or after James the Conqueror's invasion of Mallorca. After a few preliminary battles the ruler of Mallorca offered to surrender and to pay a huge indemnity to the Christian invaders if his people were allowed to leave for Africa. The King and some of

his nobles, including some who were involved in the resistance to the Albigensian crusaders, wanted to accept these terms. They were overruled, however, by the relatives of two noble brothers from the powerful Montcada family who had died in the fighting. These people argued that it would be dishonorable to allow such a peaceful conclusion without taking proper vengeance for their kinsmen's death. The Bishop of Barcelona concurred. One estimate for the number of casualties which resulted from this decision is twenty thousand.

I have one small remaining problem with this text and with this analysis. If the poet's true topic is justice and mercy, why does he proceed by this negative path through disgusting ugly violence? I have no solution to this question, although I suspect that one could be found through an analogous question. If I had titled this talk "Justice and Mercy in the Medieval Romance," how many people would be here, and how many would be the sorts of people who need to hear this poet's message?